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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

(for the period from 24 July 2003 to 19 January 2004)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1496 (2003) of 31 July 2003, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months, until 31 January 2004. It covers developments since my previous report, dated 23 July 2003 (S/2003/728).

II. Situation in the area of operation

2. During the reporting period, the situation in the UNIFIL area of operation was marked by numerous incidents threatening the fragile stability of southern Lebanon. The relative calm that had prevailed in the first half of the year gave way to renewed exchanges of fire in the Shab'a farms area. Air strikes and shooting incidents across the Blue Line resulted in the deaths of three Israelis, two soldiers and a civilian, and three Lebanese civilians. The persistent Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and several instances of Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire directed towards Israeli villages contributed significantly to the tension. Roadside explosive devices found on four occasions along the Blue Line adjacent to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) patrol route further strained relations between the parties.

3. A significant escalation of hostilities took place in early August. On 8 August, after a six-and-a-half-month lull, Hizbollah fired missiles, mortars and small arms rounds at IDF positions in the Shab'a farms area. IDF returned fire with mortars, artillery and aerial bombs into the vicinity of Kafr Shuba and points west and north, as well as rockets and machine-gun fire directed at Hizbollah positions in the vicinity. Later that day and on 9 August, Hizbollah fired anti-aircraft rounds from the general areas of Yarun and Sadra, and again on 10 August from a position near Alma ash Shab. Several of those shells landed in the Israeli village of Shelomi, killing a teenage boy and injuring four other civilians. IDF responded with an air strike on a Hizbollah position near Tayr Harfa, with no casualties reported.

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4. In the aftermath of the Israeli air strike in the Syrian Arab Republic on 5 October, two violent incidents occurred along the Blue Line. In the first, on 6 October, reported sniper fire by unidentified elements, apparently from the Lebanese side of the line, killed an Israeli soldier in an area south of Metulla. IDF retaliatory fire damaged a passing UNIFIL vehicle, two civilian vehicles and the surrounding houses, but caused no injuries. On 7 October, three rockets were fired towards Israel from the general area of Hula by unidentified elements from the Lebanese side of the line. Two landed in Lebanon, one of which fell on a house, killing a child and seriously injuring another. The third rocket landed on the Israeli side but caused no damage.

5. On 27 October, Hizbollah and IDF again exchanged fire in the Shab'a farms area. The exchange began with Hizbollah firing rockets and mortars at IDF positions in the area, prompting IDF retaliation across the line using artillery, mortar and tank rounds and aerial bombs. Both IDF and Hizbollah fire extended south, almost to the village of Ghajar. One civilian was reported to have suffered minor injuries in the village of Kaoukaba on the Lebanese side.

6. In a new development, on several occasions during the reporting period roadside explosive devices were discovered along the Blue Line adjacent to the IDF patrol road. On 5 November, IDF informed UNIFIL that it had located a set of booby-trapped explosive devices in the vicinity of the village of Ghajar. On 9 and 12 December, IDF informed UNIFIL that similar sets of devices had been discovered west of United Nations position 1-21 a few hundred metres apart, and on 4 January reported another such discovery next to the technical fence south of Tayr Harfa. All four sets of devices were discovered on Israeli territory between the withdrawal line and the technical fence. UNIFIL was able to confirm their existence before they were disposed of by IDF. On 13 October, IDF had alleged that another set of booby-trapped explosives was planted on the Lebanese side of the Line south of Alma ash Shab, in the western sector. UNIFIL notified the Lebanese authorities and investigated the site, but was unable to confirm the presence of explosive devices in that location.

7. The two most recent incidents underscored the dangers inherent in the current conditions. On 9 December, IDF shot and killed two Lebanese civilians carrying hunting rifles who were on the Israeli side of the Blue Line but on the Lebanese side of the technical fence. The area, near the Wazzani Springs, is visited frequently by Lebanese shepherds and hunters and is near the location where the explosive devices were found in November. On 19 January, Hizbollah fired an anti-tank round at an IDF bulldozer that had crossed the Blue Line into Lebanon while working to remove the explosive device reported on 4 January. One IDF soldier was killed and another wounded.

8. The recurrent Israeli air incursions into Lebanon continued. The numbers abated at times but periods of little or no activity were invariably followed by an intensification of overflights. As in the past, many of the Israeli aircraft penetrated deep into Lebanon, often generating sonic booms over populated areas. The pattern identified in my previous reports continued, whereby some aircraft would fly out to sea and enter Lebanese airspace north of the UNIFIL area of operation, thus avoiding direct observation and verification by UNIFIL.

9. Hizbollah continued to react to the air incursions with anti-aircraft fire, though only sporadically in the latter half of the reporting period. On one occasion, on 3

September, Israeli jets violated Lebanese airspace, and Hizbollah promptly fired anti-aircraft rounds in the direction of the IDF position near Zarit. Shrapnel ignited agricultural land close to the town of Shomera, but caused no casualties. A few hours later, Israeli jets carried out an air strike on a Hizbollah position close to the village of Al-Bayyadah, also resulting in no reported casualties.

10. I, my senior representatives in the region and concerned Member States made repeated calls upon the Governments of Lebanon and Israel to cease all violations of the Blue Line and to refrain from actions with escalatory potential. While the parties exercised restraint at some moments of high tension, the parties' failure to fully heed those calls and respect the Blue Line in its entirety resulted in tragic losses of life on both sides.

11. Demonstrators on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line gathered periodically at the points of friction identified in my previous reports, Sheikh Abbad Hill, east of Hula, and Fatima gate, west of Metulla, to throw stones and other objects towards Israeli positions across the line. UNIFIL also recorded a number of minor ground violations of the line, primarily by Lebanese shepherds. One Syrian national was apprehended by IDF after having crossed the Blue Line. With UNIFIL intervention, IDF returned him the next day.

12. The Lebanese Joint Security Forces and the Lebanese Army continued to operate in the areas vacated by Israel in May 2000. The strength and activity of the Joint Security Forces remained the same, apart from an increase in their activities and a more visible presence in the first half of October, when regional and local tensions were heightened. In a welcome statement made at that time, the Lebanese Central Security Council strongly reaffirmed the Joint Security Forces' task of safeguarding stability and calm and preventing any attempt by any group to undermine security in the area. Nevertheless, the Government of Lebanon continued to maintain the position that, so long as there is no comprehensive peace with Israel, Lebanese armed forces will not be deployed along the withdrawal line.

13. Under these circumstances, Hizbollah maintained its visible presence near the line through its network of mobile and fixed positions. On the whole, Hizbollah refrained from interfering with the freedom of movement of UNIFIL during the reporting period.

14. The integration of the formerly occupied zone with the rest of the country, including infrastructure, health and welfare systems, as well as postal services and communications, continued, although at a slow pace. Official local governing structures generally exercised their authority.

15. UNIFIL provided assistance to the civilian population in the form of medical care, water projects, equipment and services for schools and orphanages, and social services for the needy. This assistance was provided from resources made available primarily by troop-contributing countries. UNIFIL cooperated closely on humanitarian matters with the Lebanese authorities, United Nations agencies, in particular the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the United Nations Children's Fund, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations and agencies operating in Lebanon.

16. Since 9 August 2001, UNIFIL has been providing shelter, food and medical assistance to a group of 46 Iraqi Kurds, including women and children, who had crossed illegally from Lebanon to Israel and were consequently returned by the

Israeli army to the Lebanese side of the crossing at Naqoura. The group has been accommodated on a small plot of land between the Israeli and Lebanese gates. On 25 October, 16 of them were repatriated to Iraq by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The rest of the group insisted, however, on being resettled in a third country. UNHCR is continuing to work with local authorities in cooperation with my Personal Representative and UNIFIL to find a solution for those remaining.

17. The presence of a large number of minefields in the UNIFIL area of operation, which are now largely concentrated along the Blue Line because other sectors have been cleared of mines, remained a matter of serious concern. Since July, five Lebanese civilians have been injured as a result of exploding mines and ordnance, while one member of a commercial demining team was injured during mine-clearing operations.

18. Successful collaboration between the United Nations, the Government of Lebanon and various donors continued to yield impressive landmine clearance results in southern Lebanon. Continuing its rate of progress, the Operation Emirates Solidarity project, funded by the United Arab Emirates, resulted in a further half million square metres of previously contaminated land being returned to productive usage and a further 20,000 landmines being located and destroyed. This brought the total area of land cleared to approximately 4.8 million square metres. The United Nations, through my Personal Representative and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), continued to coordinate international assistance to the Government of Lebanon in the framework of the International Support Group for Mine Action. The major achievements in the demining process have highlighted the need for a concerted effort to address the socio-economic and rehabilitation requirements of formerly mine-affected areas. Appeals continued to be launched in the context of the International Support Group and the "trees instead of mines" initiative for southern Lebanon.

19. My Personal Representative continued to work in close collaboration with UNDP and other United Nations agencies in advocating socio-economic needs and facilitating the funding and implementation of development projects in the south. UNDP continued to lead the efforts of the United Nations system in working with the Lebanese authorities for the development and rehabilitation of the south.

III. Organizational matters

20. UNIFIL remained focused on maintaining the ceasefire through mobile and air patrols along the Blue Line, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations, resolving incidents and preventing escalation. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), through Observer Group Lebanon, supported UNIFIL in the fulfilment of its mandate.

21. As at 31 December 2003, UNIFIL comprised 2,000 troops, from France (202), Ghana (650), India (650), Ireland (7), Italy (53), Poland (238) and Ukraine (200). UNIFIL was assisted in its tasks by 52 UNTSO military observers. A map showing the current deployment of UNIFIL is attached. In addition, UNIFIL employed 415 civilian staff, of whom 119 were recruited internationally and 296 locally. Major

General Lalit Mohan Tewari continued as Force Commander. Staffan de Mistura continued to act as my Personal Representative for Southern Lebanon.

22. I regret to report the deaths of two members of the Force, a Ghanaian soldier who died of natural causes and a French soldier who was killed in an accident. Since the establishment of UNIFIL, 244 members of the Force have lost their lives, 78 as a result of firings or bomb explosions, 104 as a result of accidents and 62 from other causes. Gunfire and mine explosions wounded a total of 344.

IV. Financial aspects

23. By its resolution 57/325 of 18 June 2003, the General Assembly appropriated the amount of $90 million gross, equivalent to a monthly rate of $7.5 million gross, for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2003 to 30 June 2004. Should the Council decide to extend the mandate of UNIFIL beyond 31 January 2004, as recommended in paragraph 32 below, the cost of its maintenance would be limited to the monthly rate approved by the General Assembly.

24. As at 30 November 2003, unpaid assessments to the Special Account for UNIFIL for the period from its inception to 31 January 2004 amounted to $75.2 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $1,147.9 million.

V. Observations

25. There were a substantial number of unfortunate incidents involving the use of force in the UNIFIL area of operation, particularly during the first half of the period under review. Though the violent incidents and serious breaches of the Blue Line that took place were contained, they led to the deaths of six individuals, Lebanese and Israeli. Tensions were frequently high and the situation fragile. The potential for escalation was plainly demonstrated by the chain of events in early August and the first week of October. Members of the Security Council have used the opportunity afforded by the monthly briefings on the situation in the Middle East repeatedly to exhort the parties to refrain from any and all violations of the Blue Line. I wish to stress the need for all parties to abide fully by their obligations under the Security Council's resolutions, to exercise restraint and to respect the withdrawal line in its entirety in order to avoid deterioration of the situation on the ground.

26. It remains a matter of concern that Israel persists in its provocative air violations of sovereign Lebanese territory. Hizbollah's firing of anti-aircraft rounds across the Blue Line is also a violation, and one that poses obvious mortal risk. Israel's air strikes against Hizbollah positions added a serious new dimension to the cycle. I note that in recent weeks, Hizbollah use of anti-aircraft weaponry has declined; I hope this trend will continue. I again call upon the Governments of Israel and Lebanon to ensure that all such violations cease.

27. I note with concern the discovery of explosive devices planted along the Blue Line. Their presence undermines stability and endangers lives on both sides of the line, including those of UNIFIL personnel. Hizbollah's attack on an IDF team in the process of removing one of those devices was a regrettable escalation. UNIFIL will continue to work closely with the parties to facilitate the verification of such devices

when they are found. The neutralizing of explosive devices is the duty of the parties, and UNIFIL will continue to lend them its liaison support in this regard.

28. The Government of Lebanon has demonstrated its capacity to exercise its authority throughout southern Lebanon, particularly through the activities of the Joint Security Forces and the Lebanese Army during periods of heightened regional and local tension. I reiterate the Security Council's call for the Government of Lebanon to extend these measures, including the deployment of Lebanese armed forces in the south, and to do its utmost to ensure calm. I urge the Government to exert control over the use of force on its entire territory and to prevent all attacks across the Blue Line.

29. I note the success in demining over the past year and its promise for southern Lebanon's social and economic development. The rate and pace of development needs to be accelerated by bold and pragmatic measures by all concerned if stability is to be the outcome. In this respect, I urge both the Government of Lebanon and the international donors to bolster their efforts. The United Nations remains strongly committed to assisting Lebanon in its economic rehabilitation of the south.

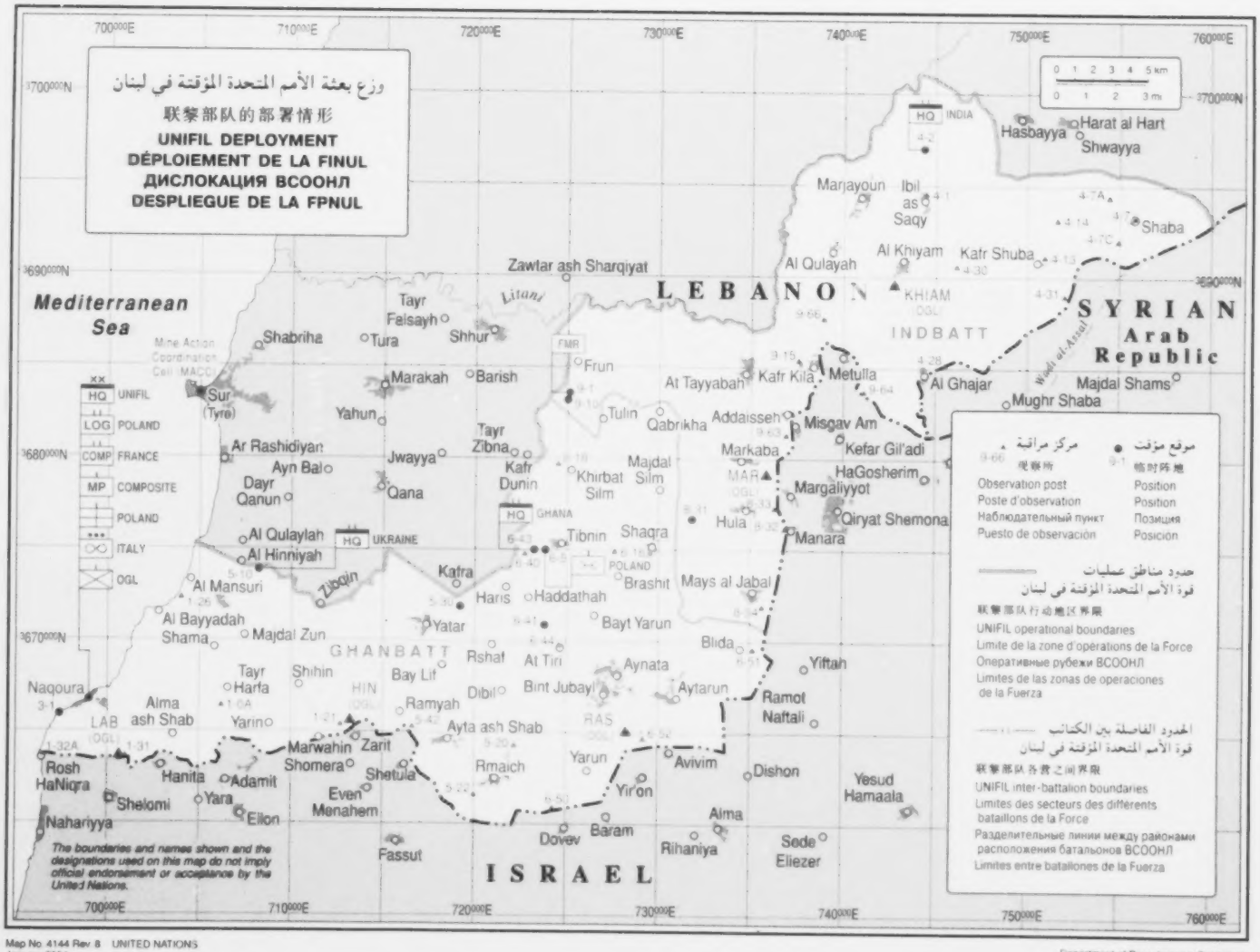
30. UNIFIL will continue to contribute to the restoration of international peace and security by observing, monitoring and reporting on developments in its area of operation and maintaining liaison with the parties to preserve calm. My Personal Representative will continue in close consultation with the Special Coordinator to lend the political and diplomatic support of the United Nations to the parties to establish lasting peace and security in southern Lebanon.

31. We have seen that the situation along the Blue Line is susceptible to volatile regional developments. This, again, underscores the need to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

32. In a letter dated 14 January 2004 (S/2004/35), the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations conveyed to me his Government's request that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for a further period of six months. In the light of conditions prevailing in the area, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL until 31 July 2004.

33. I must again draw attention to the serious shortfall in the funding of the Force. At present, unpaid assessments amount to $75.2 million. Eventually, this represents money owed to the Member States contributing the troops that make up the Force. I appeal to all Member States to pay their assessments promptly and in full and to clear all remaining arrears. I should like to express my gratitude to the Governments contributing troops to the Force for their understanding and patience.

34. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to Terje Roed-Larsen, the Special Coordinator, and Staffan de Mistura, my Personal Representative, and to pay tribute to Major General Lalit Mohan Tewari and the men and women of UNIFIL for the manner in which they have carried out their tasks. Their discipline and bearing have been of a high order, reflecting credit on themselves and the United Nations.



Map No. 4144 Rev. 8 UNITED NATIONS
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Cartographic Section